CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the aim of the study was to investigate the process of disclosure among a group of black South African homosexuals. In particular looking at the factors that play a role in facilitating and inhibiting the process of disclosure. Furthermore, exploring the effects of disclosure and how negative consequences are dealt with. This was achieved through employing a qualitative research methodology which made it possible to gather data based on the subjective experiences from black South African homosexuals.

Disclosure is an important, yet difficult process faced by most homosexuals. What makes the process of disclosure difficult is the fact that homosexuality is still regarded as a deviation from the norm. Although the South African constitution endorses the rights of homosexuals, most people are struggling to accept homosexuality and view heterosexuality as the only accepted sexual orientation. Given such circumstances, it becomes difficult to disclose one's homosexual orientation in a society which still holds conservative views about homosexuality.

Despite the negative connotations linked to homosexuality, homosexual individuals have to face the process of disclosure. Self-identification and acceptance of one's homosexual identity is considered to be the first step towards the process of disclosure (Krouse, 1993). The awareness of self as homosexual often comes during early to late adolescence stage. It is during this stage that individuals start to reflect on the fact that they are different from their counterparts. They become aware that their behaviour, feelings and interests are different from how they are expected to behave, feel and be interested in. It can be said that society expects individuals to be heterosexual. Thus an individual who is attracted to people of the same sex, behaves like and takes interest in activities of people of the opposite sex tends to receive negative reactions from society and family. It can be confusing to the person experiencing homosexual

feelings to be told that homosexuality is "immoral". This is the stage where homosexual individuals begin to consider homosexuality as their sexual orientation and take interest in homosexual related issues in order to inform themselves about the facts of homosexuality. The information can be acquired through engaging with or observing other homosexuals. Depending on the nature of information received, the individual then decides whether to take up homosexuality or to reject it. An individual who receives negative information about homosexuality is likely to reject it. On the other hand, those who acquire positive information are likely to accept homosexuality as their sexual orientation.

Those who accept the homosexual identity and define themselves as such have to face the process of disclosure. This process can be a difficult one; given the fact that homosexuality is considered "immoral" by most people. Therefore, disclosing would mean that the individual is likely to be viewed as a "deviant". Individuals choose between partial and full disclosure. Those who choose partial disclosure only disclose to a certain group of people that are likely to be accepting. Most people who opt for partial disclosure are not necessarily concerned about people in general, but are mostly concerned about their family's reactions. Often, one anticipates negative reactions from family members. Therefore, partial disclosure is influenced by the fear of rejection and discrimination. On the other hand, those who choose to fully disclose do not hide their homosexuality and are comfortable with everyone knowing, despite the possible sanctions that might ensue. The most common forms of such sanctions are rejection by one's next of kin and society and discrimination. A social support system becomes important in this case. The support often comes from fellow homosexuals and heterosexuals who accept homosexuality.

Family plays a very vital role in the decision to disclose. The family's support facilitates disclosure while negative reactions are likely to discourage and instil fear of disclosure. Some, if not most parents, from the black South African community usually find it difficult to understand how their children can be homosexual and often view it as failure on their part to raise their children with morals (Herdt, 1997; Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Some few parents, with the help of the increasing knowledge about

homosexuality, reach a point where they tolerate their children's homosexuality while others never reach that point but continue to resent their homosexual children. There is a discrepancy between the way fathers and mothers deal with the news of having a homosexual child. Mothers tend to be more accepting while fathers struggle to accept and often make attempts to change their child into being heterosexual. This is influenced by the public opinion that promotes heterosexuality and rejects homosexuality.

Herdt (1997) argues that religious beliefs are among the factors that promote homophobia. Religion tends to discriminate against homosexuals and homosexuality is considered to be a sin. Therefore, some individuals may feel that by being homosexual they are committing a sin, and thus refrain from exploring and accepting their sexual orientation. Subsequently, any acts of homosexuality are avoided and thus disclosure hampered.

One of the justifications used by homophobic people to justify their stance towards homosexuality is that homosexuality is unAfrican (Germond & De Gruchy, 1997; Murray & Roscoe, 1998). There are many misconceptions about homosexuality which shape and influence people's perceptions. Some South African people believe that homosexuality did not exist in South Africa until the arrival of the missionaries who apparently brought with them the Western ways of life, including homosexuality. Murray & Roscoe (1998) indicate that although homosexuality is shunned by the South African black society and regarded as a white sexual orientation, there are many black homosexuals who have emerged and are still emerging. Those individuals who do decide to disclose their homosexuality are at risk of being labelled as "un African".

Although a shift has been observed towards tolerating homosexuality, it is moving steadily. This in turn impacts on the homosexual persons who desire to come out of the closet and share their sexual identity with others. However, those members of society that have learnt to accept homosexuality play a major role in encouraging homosexuals to disclose their sexual orientation. Although homophobic attacks are prevalent, they do not always hinder the disclosure of those committed homosexuals who wish to disclose.

It seems that despite the challenges that come with disclosure, there are individuals who feel that the sense of relief they experience after disclosure is worth the difficulties that come with disclosure. On the other hand, there are those individuals who feel that the negative consequences of disclosure outweigh the positive outcomes of disclosure. The latter decide to keep their homosexuality secret and might even engage in heterosexual activities as an attempt to fit into society and to have a sense of belonging.

Limitations of the study and subsequent recommendations are worth noting. The sample included only males which could have biased the results in terms of gender. Therefore future research could look at the process of disclosure among a group of female black homosexual to determine if the process of disclosure is similar in both male and female homosexuals. The sample used in this study was small and consisted of individuals who had an advanced educational background. It would also be interesting to view the results of data gathered from a more diverse population sample, in terms of socio-economic and educational background. It would also be interesting to explore the same research questions among an older group of people to assess if there would be differences in terms of how the process of disclosure is negotiated and how negative consequences are dealt with.